

# Editorials

## Diseases Desperate Grown

*Diseases desperate grown by desperate appliance  
are relieved, or not at all.*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE  
*Hamlet. IV:iii, 9*

WE HAVE A desperate disease in America: neglect of our children. We know that

- One of five children in the United States lives in poverty<sup>1</sup>;
- 3.5 million children go to bed hungry<sup>1</sup>;
- About 3,000 adolescents become regular smokers every day<sup>1</sup>;
- 14% of boys and 13% of girls have been robbed at school<sup>1</sup>;
- 3 million adolescents contract sexually transmitted disease every year.<sup>1</sup>
- From November 1990 to November 1991, the number of teens diagnosed with the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome increased 25%.<sup>2</sup>
- The most recent comparison of our infant mortality rate with the rest of the world's ranked the United States as 23rd, a drop from 20th in 1980.<sup>3</sup>
- Although total infant mortality in the United States dropped in 1990, the gap between African-American and white infants increased.<sup>3</sup>

Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund, projected last year that, in America by 1996, if no immediate action is taken,

- 1,080,000 babies will be born at low birth weight;
- 143,619 babies will die before their first birthday;
- 15,856 children aged 19 or younger will die by firearms;
- 3,600,000 infants will be born into poverty.<sup>4</sup>

The children are not at fault. No one can blame a baby for having a low birth weight. In fact, blame is not the issue at all. The issue is, where do we go from here?

At bedrock, we need to believe that a society's worth is measured by the way it treats its most vulnerable members. Children are vulnerable. To advance vigorously, we need to agree that children are not only at risk but are also important. They are not necessarily more important than any other group, but they are important. They require attention and care. They are the future. There is a certain practical 1990s application of William Wordsworth's "The child is the father of the man." And that is, according to James Garbarino, PhD, a specialist in preventing and treating child abuse, "If we don't deal with the adolescents as victims, we will ultimately have to deal with large numbers of them as perpetrators."<sup>5(p3)</sup>

We need to understand the forces behind the data. Biology, psychology, and social factors such as family structure are important. Sometimes, frankly, because of inadequacy, selfishness, or worse, parents and others let children down, abandon them, do not meet their needs, reject them, ignore them, and otherwise hurt them. Children may be bereft of a strong sense of self, healthy body, an

uplifting spirit. Poverty, poverty, poverty is not the only determinant, but it is a multiplier in many health problems of children. Children from low-income families have double the incidence of low birth weight, bacterial meningitis, and severe iron deficiency and triple the frequency of delayed immunization and lead poisoning.<sup>7</sup> Poverty, lack of education, and inadequate health care, housing, and nutrition are linked.

Although we need more information and analysis, we should push ahead now, doing the best we can. The stakes are high. Children are starting to smoke, drink, and use other drugs, on average, when they are 12 years old; the number of adolescents between 10 and 14 years of age will increase by more than 16% during the 1990s.<sup>8</sup>

We have learned that laws do not always deter. They do not stop young people from obtaining our number one killer, tobacco. A recent study of teenagers' access to tobacco products in Texas showed that signs required by state law were rarely posted and their presence did not prevent purchases anyway: most teens were still able to buy cigarettes.<sup>8</sup> If laws are not the whole answer, the mere presence of information and services is not, either. Rather, as David Hamburg, MD, president of the Carnegie Corporation, points out in this issue,<sup>9</sup> we need early, full, coordinated efforts by virtually all our institutions. We need to give attention to each child, not only "children" as an impersonal classification.

Can we do it? Can we relieve our desperate disease of neglected children? Can we put our shared values into action? Can we harness our spirit? Edith Wharton said, "There are two ways to spread the light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it."<sup>10</sup> Hamburg has illumined a reasonable, achievable way to save our children. Let's glow.

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## REFERENCES

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## Predicting Outcome From Mechanical Ventilation

MANY ASPECTS OF traditional medical practice are undergoing fundamental change. Physical diagnosis, histori-